Poems from One Day My Hands Will Touch the Ceiling

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Poems from *One Day My Hands Will Touch the Ceiling*

Erika M. Martínez

**From New Jersey**

It’s Christmas time in Santo Domingo.  
We expect your arrival before Noche Buena,  
but we await for El Día de los Reyes,  
caravans of camels with magi on their backs.  
We’ll see the parade without you in January heat  
from a balcony above Avenida Mella  
days after your departure.

As you open the door with luggage in tow  
I race to the front screaming,  
Papi, Papi, Papi.  
Melissa and Francisco in my wake.  
Your arms unfurl like wings  
to the three of us; this  
is your landing.

In the whirls of your welcome  
uncle parks his car at the foot of our driveway,  
Cousins run to him screaming,  
Papi, Papi, Papi—echoes of our notes,  
yet they see him every morning for breakfast;  
watch him eat his favorite bread with honey  
at home, only three miles away.

In days less than a week,  
we collect moments together under our skin  
as succulents collect water,  
to survive the long dry spells.  
When you return to New Jersey  
we can only be consoled  
by the coming of the kings.

**For a Week**

Awaken with bites from mosquitoes—  
small flames on ankles for him to extinguish.  
I run to their room, find he’s no longer sleeping.  
Warm sheets whisper, He was just here.

Mami, on her side, points to their bathroom.  
I weave through the clutter spilling  
from gray suitcases—familiar and hostile.  
Surrounded by yellow tiles he stands  
in white briefs, cream on his face.

My eyes quiver at the sight of his flesh,  
anticipate lashings, but  
he left his temper in New Jersey,  
hanging in the closet between navy blue shirts; there  
where impatience lies on the floor  
next to steel-toed boots.  
His smile welcomes me to the wall-length mirror.  
In between strokes he speaks to my reflection,  
asks about sleep and dreams  
until his blade reveals  
the last strip of hidden skin.

My heels scratch the unbearable itch.  
As he dabs menthol across my welts  
I describe a hatred for oatmeal.  
I want eggs for breakfast, I say,  
imagine them fried on my plate—  
two suns in billowy clouds.

All right, he says,  
Seven days: too short for discord.  
We mend our lives together again  
knowing the stitches will come undone  
in a week.

**Displacement**

In New Jersey, I crossed urban lines  
every day from West New York to Union City.  
The gloomy Hudson replaced my malecón.  
Summers—which I thought were eternal—shortened  
by bitter winters that chapped my face.

I lingered between Lincoln Tunnel and George Washington Bridge,  
across the street from the projects  
where I heard teenage girl screams  
and passed by cemeteries daily lined with tombstones  
that forced me to think of death with each dawn.

I stepped on weeds rising up to the sun  
through the cracks in uneven sidewalks.  
I was surrounded by concrete, gravel, brick, asphalt,  
parks without grass littered with big wheels  
which we dodged on roller skates bought from Goodwill.

My feet missed cool tiles  
as they walked on green shag carpet mildewed  
and torn linoleum mended with duck tape  
to cover exposed wooden beams  
that creaked underneath.

Don Armando’s bodega next door warmed some winter
moments
with chicharrones in between days without food
when icy wind whirled through cracked windows covered
in plastic,
refreshed us in summer with quimalitos when raindrops
evaporated
as they met our dilapidated rooftop.

But soothing occasions like those were scattered
in the cojelo fiao ‘cause there’s no more food stamps
and mañana, si Dios quiere, things will get better.